



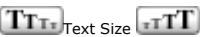


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## Suite Sounds: National Council Grand Finals concert; Mark Rucker sings!

By ALICIA HALL MORAN

Special to the AmNews

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I overheard this in the red-draped lobby of the Metropolitan Opera House on Sunday afternoon, March 13, after the Met's Grand Finals Concert: "My favorites were the two Black singers!"

"Me too!" was the enthusiastic response, to which the judges of the Grand Finals concert may well have said, "Amen!" Both African-American singers were among the five grand prizewinners; soprano Michelle Johnson of Pearland, Texas and bass-baritone Ryan Speedo Green of Suffolk, Va. each earned a \$15,000 award.

The Met National Council Audition, as the competition is formally known, is not an evening for shrinking violets. It follows, then, that most of the very impressive singing isn't of the intimate, delicate sort. This audience wants the spectacle of a singer selling the big emotions to the back of the theater. It is survival of the fittest larynx; "American Idol" for the classical world and some of the same imperatives apply. First and foremost: Choose the right song. This is strategy 101.

The winners chose wisely. Did anyone in the audience not hear some Leontyne Price in the voluptuous tide of Johnson's rich soprano on Mozart's "Dove sono" or Cilea's "Lo son l'umile ancella"? "Effortless power," remarked an audience member and new fan. And who could miss the vibrant personality and theatrical bravado of Green as he shone through Rossini's "La calunnia è un venticello"?

"He always had this potential. It is great to see him grow into it in this extraordinary way," said Green's high school classmate and current Juilliard student Adam Richardson.

In 1953, another baritone, Robert McFerrin, won the competition which was then called "Auditions of the Air." He received the award of professional training, but the Met denied him the customary Metropolitan Opera contract, because they hadn't yet integrated their productions. Then, in 1955, by debuting both McFerrin and Marian Anderson in the same month the Met ended their racist policy and ushered in a golden era of American opera.

Early African-American award-winners of the competition include Martina Arroyo, Grace Bumbry, George Shirley and Shirley Verrett. They were followed by others like Jessye Norman, Kathleen Battle, Denyce Graves, Eric Owens, Anita Johnson, Angela Brown, Nicole Cabell, Takesha Meshé Kizart and a current reigning Met tenor, Lawrence Brownlee.

As divertissement Brownlee sang for us heroically as the judges deliberated backstage. I cannot recall such ebullient ovations as the ones he received after his two arias. The ease and lightness of his technique may have levitated the crowd. Upon the close of his second aria, Donizetti's gymnastic "Ah! Mes amis" from "La Fille du Régiment" with its nine high Cs, many listeners leapt from their seats.

The Metropolitan Opera Orchestra was conducted by Patrick Summers. The hair and makeup team deserves special mention for giving each young hopeful a larger-than-life sophistication worthy of the grand stage.

And so it went at arguably the biggest singing competition in the country, the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions.

But my evening wasn't over. Next stop: Chelsea Opera's celebration of Mark Rucker, the Verdi baritone, who sang for us from one of his Metropolitan Opera roles that evening—a potent and hearty "Si può" with his wife, Sadie Rucker, at the piano! A true artistic gift to the audience.

Christ and St. Stephen's Church on West 69th Street was packed—a testimony to the impact of Chelsea Opera and Rucker's talent and energy.

Established in 2004, Chelsea Opera provides an intimate alternative to the city's grand opera houses—and ticket prices. Cofounder and mezzo-soprano Leonarda Priore said, "Talent alone will not assure a place on the stage. Mark has been a constant mentor. He takes stock in singers personally...He has been a motivator for so many of our dreams."

In the audience, and in every performance, the spirit of opera was alive. Benjamin Wenzelberg's warm, clear tenor and Lawrence Harris' seasoned and complete performance were especially seductive. It was an inspiring night out.